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ABSTRACT

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is an information-gathering project that surveys the educational attainments of 9 year olds, 13 year olds, 17 year olds, and adults (ages 26 to 35) in ten learning areas, one of which is writing. This report focuses on persuasive and explanatory letter writing, representing two basic aims of discourse. The letters, divided into two broad categories of social letters and business letters, were read and categorized by experienced English and composition teachers. NAEP reports the responses to certain exercises of groups of individuals defined according to sex, race, region of the country, level of parental education, and size and type of community. Some of the report's observations are that simple explanatory-writing skills are developed sometime between the ages of 9 and 13 and that persuasive-writing skills are complex and difficult to master. (JM)

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NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

EXPLANATORY AND PERSUASIVE LETTER WRITING

Selected Results From the Second National Assessment of Writing

Writing Report No. 05-W-03

February 1977

CS 203 221

NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS
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FOREWORD

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is an information-gathering project that surveys the educational attainments of 9-year-olds, 13-year-olds, 17-year-olds and adults (ages 26-35) in 10 learning areas: art, career and occupational development, citizenship, literature, mathematics, music, reading, science, social studies and writing. Different learning areas are assessed every year, and all areas are periodically reassessed in order to measure changes in educational attainment.

Each assessment is the product of several years' work by a great many educators, scholars and lay persons from all over the country. Initially, these people design objectives for each area, proposing specific goals that they feel Americans should be achieving in the course of their education. After careful reviews, these objectives are then given to exercise (item) writers, whose task it is to create measurement tools appropriate to the objectives.

When the exercises have passed extensive reviews by subject-matter specialists, measurement experts and concerned lay people, they are administered to probability samples from various age levels. The people who comprise these samples are chosen in such a way that the results of their assessment can be generalized to an entire national population. That is, on the basis of the performance of about 2,500 9-year-olds on a given exercise, we can generalize about the probable performance of all 9-year-olds in the nation.

National Assessment also publishes a general information yearbook that describes all major aspects of the Assessment's operation. The reader who desires more detailed information about how NAEP defines its groups, prepares and scores its exercises, designs its samples, analyzes the findings and reports its results should consult the *General Information Yearbook*.[1]

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[1] *General Information Yearbook, Report 03/04-GIY* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1974).

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Many organizations and individuals have made substantial contributions to the two writing assessments and to the writing study discussed in this report. Not the least of those to be gratefully acknowledged are the administrators, teachers and students who cooperated so generously in the assessment. Particular thanks go to Richard Lloyd-Jones and Carl Klaus of the University of Iowa for their pioneering work on the scoring system used for this study; the scoring staff at the Measurement Research Center (Iowa City, Iowa) for their tireless application of the system to thousands of student essays; and Ina Mullis, the National Assessment overseer of the writing assessment.

The actual preparation of this report was a collaborative effort of the National Assessment staff. Special thanks go to Bill Ankeny, Charlotte Ramlow, Harlan Bowles and Peggy Robinson for data processing support; Ava Powell for technical proofreading; and Marci Reser and Jessica Grant for production. This report was written by Robert Crane.

Roy H. Forbes
Project Director

INTRODUCTION

The 1973-74 national assessment of writing consisted of many tasks, ranging from the addressing of envelopes to the writing of various kinds of letters and essays, to the rewriting of essays. The first report of results from that assessment, *Writing Mechanics 1969-1974*,[1] focused upon changes in the structure and mechanics of student's compositions over four- and five-year periods. A second report focuses on information about expressive writing abilities. This report focuses on persuasive and explanatory writing within the letter writing mode.

Persuasive writing and explanatory writing represent two basic aims of discourse. In theory, each has a distinct focus: persuasive writing is audience oriented; explanatory writing is subject-matter oriented. Yet in the practice of writing, these sharp distinctions break down. The goals of any given rhetorical situation must be viewed along a continuum upon which various purposes are to be met and various devices are to be used. For example, persuasive writing is audience oriented; however, certain persuasive writing tasks demand explanatory writing as well. In such situations, categorical organization and explicit evidence are important in order to explain as well as to persuade effectively.

In the writing assessment, respondents were asked to use both persuasive and explanatory skills in writing letters covering a wide range of societal demands and obligations. In this report, these letters have been divided into the two broad categories of social letters and business and vocational letters, reflecting a division established in the objectives developed for the 1973-74 writing assessment by many educators in the field of English and composition.[2]

An assumption inherent in these letter writing tasks is that they represent attempts to accomplish certain goals. If the task is carefully enough defined, there are some writing strategies that will accomplish that particular goal, while others will fail to reach it. To take a simple example, a thank you note for a gift requires certain internal conventions, such as saying thank you, showing appreciation and naming the gift. Notes that include these things are appropriate; those that do not are inappropriate, no matter how well written. Respondents who understand the nature of writing a thank you note will be able to respond appropriately to the task.

Experienced English and composition teachers read and categorized the letter writing tasks found in this report. They discussed the rationale for each item, studied the scoring guides developed by the writing consultants and the National Assessment staff, and read a number of training papers before they commenced the final reading. Throughout the process, NAEP staff monitored reliability and fine tuned the procedure to maximize efficiency and minimize costs.

Readers of this report should remember that these papers were collected under test-like conditions and represent first-draft writing

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[1] *Writing Mechanics, 1969-1974: A Capsule Description of Changes in Writing Mechanics, Report 05-W-01*, 1969-70 and 1973-74 Assessments (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975).

[2] See *Writing Objectives*, 1973-74 National Assessment of Writing (Denver, Colo.: Education Commission of the States, 1972) for a detailed description of the objectives and the procedures involved in their development.

within certain time constraints. The scoring criteria used in describing and evaluating the papers take this factor into account. This study assumes, however, that we can learn a great deal about persuasive and explanatory writing, as well as letter writing abilities, from such papers.

Some of the letter writing exercises were part of the 1969 writing assessment. For these items, we have data on changes in letter writing ability over time.

Reporting Variables

National Assessment, unlike most testing programs, does not report scores for individuals. Rather, it reports how defined groups of individuals respond to certain exercises. The groups are characterized by age, sex, race, region of the country, level of parental education, and size and type of community. These groups are defined as follows:

Sex

Results are presented for males and females.

Race

Currently, results are reported for blacks and whites.

Size and Type of Community (STOC)

Community types are identified both by the size of the community and by the type of employment of the majority of people in the community.

High metro (high-socioeconomic or affluent urban and suburban communities). Areas in or around cities with a population greater than 200,000 where a high proportion of the residents are in professional or managerial positions.[3]

Low metro (low-socioeconomic or impoverished urban). Areas in or around cities with a population greater than 200,000 where a high proportion of the residents are on welfare or are not regularly employed.[3]

Extreme rural. Areas with a population under 10,000 where most of the residents are farmers or farm workers.[3]

Urban fringe. Communities within the metropolitan area of a city with a population greater than 200,000, outside the city limits and not in the high- or low-metro groups.

Main big city. Communities within the city limits of a city with a population over 200,000 and not included in the high- or low-metro groups.

Medium city. Cities with populations between 25,000 and 200,000.

Small places. Communities with a population of less than 25,000 and not in the extreme-rural group.

Parental Education

Four categories of parental education are defined by National Assessment. These categories include: (1) those whose parents have had no high school education, (2) those who have at least one parent with some high school education, (3) those who have at least one parent who graduated from high school and (4) those who have at least one parent who has had some post high school education.

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[3]Population sizes were determined from 1970 Census data. Occupations were estimated by sample schools.

The text of this report provides limited group results. Data for blacks and whites, males and females and high- and low-metro students are given in most cases. Complete group results and detailed statistical documentation will appear in the technical report on writing.[4]

Region

The country has been divided into four regions — Northeast, Southeast, Central and West. The states that are included in each region are shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. National Assessment Geographic Regions

[4] *Writing Technical Report: Exercise Volume, Report 05-W-20,* 1973-74 Assessment (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, forthcoming).

CHAPTER 1

SOCIAL LETTERS

The two kinds of writing found in this section conform to different conventions and require different approaches.

Exercises 1 (thank you note) and 2 (get well note) are personal in nature and represent informal writing. The main criterion for judging adequacy of these letters is the accuracy of the information transmitted and, where appropriate, the tone and style of communication. Exercises 3 and 4 are more formal, the writers being required to represent someone or some organization in addition to themselves. This kind of writing demands higher levels of explanatory- and persuasive-writing skills and a greater degree of correctness. To write something that represents your views alone is one thing; to write a piece that represents a particular social group is another. For these reasons, 9-year-olds were asked to respond to items of an informal personal nature only, while 13-year-olds were asked to write more formal letters.

Personal Letter Writing

Although little letter writing of any kind is done by most 9-year-olds, these children have usually learned simple conventions of letter writing in school and have written simple personal notes to friends or relatives. In the following two exercises, National Assessment examines the ability of 9-year-olds to formulate simple thank you and get well notes.

EXERCISE 1. Writing a Thank You Note

Think of something that you would like to have very much. Pretend that you are Pat Brown and someone you know very well has just given it to you.

Write the gift you would like to have in this box.

Tell who gave it to you in this box.

Write a letter to that person saying thank you and telling why you like the gift. Space is provided on the next two pages.

The thank-you-note exercise seeks two basic kinds of information: whether 9-year-old writers successfully expressed appreciation for a specific gift and whether they invented reasons for liking the gift. The key forms in the directive are "write a letter saying thank you," which sets up a conventional social situation, and "telling why you like the gift," which requires the respondent to invent appropriate details. Is the child aware that in a thank you note one should say "thank you" or express appreciation in some other way? Is the child aware that the gift should be specifically named or at least desciptively identified as a way of showing its value or to distinguish it from other gifts? Additional persuasive details, involving elaboration of reasons for liking the gift or establishing the personal value of the gift are also desirable responses to this exercise.

The letters were placed into four general categories.

1. Notes that did not identify the gift, showed bare appreciation for an unidentified gift or were not thank you notes. These responses were considered inadequate. Two examples of notes categorized in this way are:

Dear friend

I thank you for the gift!

Love,
Suzanne

I like because I can play with it.

2. Notes that were clearly thank you notes. In these, the gift was named or clearly identifiable from the content of the letter; and there was a minimal expression of appreciation, use or satisfaction. These responses were considered to be basic. Some examples include:

Dear Grandson

I thank you for that wonderful lemon cake.

Love Mother

dere dad,

I Love the car and jacket next time bring me a base ball bat and ball

3. Notes in which the item was clearly identifiable from the context of the letter, and appreciation or satisfaction was expressed in some detail. These responses were considered competent. Examples of these notes include:

Dear Dad & Ma

Thank you for the 5 dollars. I gave it to a home that needed it. Thay bough some food and some close for the baby. It was a lot of help for them.

Your truly,
Roy

Dear Mom and Dad,

Thank you For the gift you gave me I Like it very mach I have bin riding it evry day.

Thank you
Love,
Sandy

4. Notes that had fully developed responses. The supporting details had to be appropriate, as well as vivid or significant. Furthermore, imaginative reasons for gratitude were included. These responses were considered excellent. For example:

Dear Dad,

I like the go-kart really swell. I like it even though it is really not a go-kart, it is a lawm-mowr fixed up like a go-kart. Thanks for it. But what I need now is gasoline and paint. I need the paint so I can paint it Red, Blue and a White number 43. I want it to be just like Richard Petty's car. I ride all the guys on it. They all say it is super. If I could get it going faster.

5. "Unacceptable" responses included illegible notes, essays about some other subject and blank papers. Results for each category appear in Table 1.

Approximately 23% of the 9-year-olds wrote inadequate thank you notes or notes that were not categorizable in substantive terms. Among the 77% who wrote acceptable notes, the overall quality varied considerably. Girls appear to have more highly developed skills in this area — 62% of them, compared to 45% of the boys, could write a competent thank you at this age. Fewer black and low-metro students wrote competent notes than did students in other groups. In fact, their percentages of noncategorizable

TABLE 1. Overall Quality of the Thank You Notes, Age 9

Evaluation of Notes	Percentages						
	National	Males	Females	Blacks	Whites	High Metro	Low Metro
Inadequate	15	17*	14	20*	14*	13	21
Basic	22	27*	17*	22	22	23	21
Competent	54	44*	62*	39*	58*	60	42*
Excellent	1	1	2	1	2	1	0*
Other**	8	11*	6*	18*	6*	4*	15*

*Indicates significant difference from the nation.
**Includes no response, illegible or incomprehensible papers about a different topic and I don't know.

papers were twice the national percentage.

In another exercise (Exercise 2) 9-year-olds were asked to write a letter based on the following information.

EXERCISE 2. Writing a Get Well Note

Pretend that one of your classmates has hurt his leg and will have to stay at home for a long time. Your class would like to cheer him up. You have all decided to write him letters.

Write a letter to your classmate. Write the kind of letter you think he would be happy to get.

The nature of the directive made it impossible to determine a firm standard of acceptability. In some cases, a sarcastic or caustic note might cheer up a friend as much or more than a traditional get well note. Since the nature of the friendship would determine the tone of the note each student wrote, only minimal standards of acceptability were established. The overall responses were categorized as follows:

1. Acceptable responses had a letter body, were readable and on the subject. Examples include:

Dear Jim,

Our class is writing you a letter. Just think its almost Valentine's Day. Ill bet I will send out the most cards. How many people singhed your cast? How is your leg? We all miss you & hope you will be feeling better soon.

Your friend,
Sue

Dear Steve,

Your going to be so happy becaus one of your best friends is giving you a surprise. I would tell you who it was but then it wouldn't be a surprise. But one think is that where all coming to see you and play games a tell jokes just like it was your birthday. See you soon.

From,
Karen

P.S. My bird says see you soon.

2. Responses were unacceptable if they were unreadable, or were not letters or were not on the subject. Some examples include:

Chris hurt his leg and I am going to send him a lette r to cheer him up and then i am going to give him a gift to cheer him up and some money too.

Deer Jim,

I hope that your cat. get well a gan. So he hope she did me to.

Form Willie
to Jim

I wood help him and get help and call a Doctor.

3. Other responses included those where students wrote something like "I don't know" or gave no response at all to the exercise.

Table 2 provides the percentages of students in each of the categories in 1974. The percentage of students answering acceptably did not change significantly between 1969 and 1974. The 1974 national percentage of acceptable responses is high (90%); the differences for boys and girls are not particularly noteworthy, though the edge still goes to the girls. Although three out of four black and low-metro 9-year-olds responded acceptably to this exercise, these percentages were still well below the national levels.

Data on specific formatting characteristics for the get well notes written in 1974 are found in Table 3. In general, the percentage of 9-year-olds acceptably using the various formatting techniques declined between 1969 and 1974 in all of the groups. Approximately 50% of this age level acceptably formatted all aspects of the letter in 1969, compared to 44% in 1974.

Another National Assessment exercise that evaluated skills in using various letter writing conventions is shown in Exercise 3.

EXERCISE 3. Parts of a Letter

Here are some parts of a letter. Write them on the blank lines where you think they should go. Do NOT write a letter.

257 Main Street
June 24, 1973
Midland, Ohio 45148

Dear Aunt Jane,
Your newphew,
Albert Clark

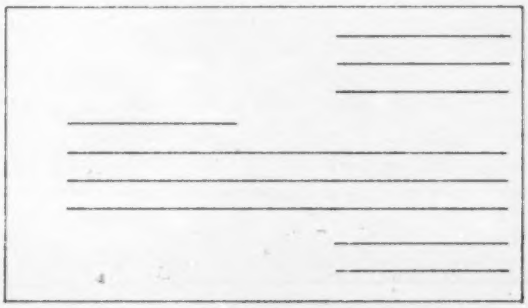


TABLE 2. Overall Quality of the Get Well Notes, Age 9

Category	Percentages						
	National	Males	Females	Blacks	Whites	High Metro	Low Metro
Acceptable	90	87*	92*	74*	93*	96*	74*
Unacceptable	8	10*	7*	20*	5*	4*	17*
Other**	2	3	1	6	1	0*	9

**Indicates significant difference from the nation.*
***Other includes no response and I don't know.*

TABLE 3. Specific Aspects of Get Well Note, Age 9

Format Characteristics	Percentages						
	National	Males	Females	Blacks	Whites	High Metro	Low Metro
Acceptable greeting	69	65*	74*	55*	74*	85*	52*
Acceptable closing	51	45*	57*	30*	57*	69*	26*
Includes letter body	92	91*	94*	82*	95*	97*	81*
Readable	94	91*	96*	84*	96*	99*	84*
Subject-specific	92	89*	96*	79*	96*	99*	81*
All aspects acceptable	44	39*	50*	24*	50*	63*	20*

**Indicates significant difference from the nation.*

This exercise was scored on the basis of the conventions commonly used in writing a letter. These include using the date; the writer's street address; city, state and zip code at the top; a greeting; a closing; and a signature. Differences in the abilities of 9- and 13-year-olds were rather obvious. A greater percentage of 13-year-olds knew these conventions in all cases; however, the difference between the percentage of 9- and 13-year-olds knowing any given one varied from 10 to 29 percentage points, depending on the convention. The greeting line of the letter was the most commonly known at both ages, while the return address lines posed the greatest difficulty. Table 4 gives the percentages of 9- and 13-year-olds giving various responses to each item.

TABLE 4. Conventions in Letter Writing: Percentages of Respondents Properly Using Each Convention, Ages 9 and 13

		Acceptable	Unacceptable	No Response
Age 9	Top line of return	79%	15%	5%
Age 13	address	89	10	1
Age 9	Middle line of return	39	53	7
Age 13	address	64	34	2
Age 9	Bottom line of return	42	48	9
Age 13	address	66	32	2
Age 9	Greeting line	84	9	7
Age 13		96	3	2
Age 9	Closing line	50	26	23
Age 13		79	14	6
Age 9	Signature line	49	25	25
Age 13		77	15	8

Two forms of the return address were considered acceptable. Students could either start or end with the date; however, in either case the street address had to precede the city, state and zip code.

While 55% of the older group could use all six letter conventions properly, this percentage dropped to 26% at age 9. A comparison of the relative performance of boys and girls and black and white students shows that the differences in achievement levels tend to either remain constant or increase as the students get older. For example, the percentage of black students at both ages successfully completing the exercise was approximately half that of the whites. The relative difference in the performance of boys and girls varied considerably between ages 9 and 13. By age 13, the gap in male/female performances had widened appreciably; girls were doing far better than the boys on this item. Black students at both age levels and students who live in impoverished, urban communities performed far below the national levels; and their distance widened with age. Those in affluent suburban and urban areas performed above the national levels. Table 5 illustrates these points.

TABLE 5. Conventions in Letter Writing: Percentages of Respondents Properly Using All Six Conventions, Ages 9 and 13

	Age 9	Age 13
Nation	26%	55%
Males	23*	44*
Females	29*	66*
Blacks	14*	27*
Whites	28*	60*
High metro	34*	67*
Low metro	10*	30*

**Indicates significant difference from the nation.*

At age 9, the percentage of students successfully using all six conventions did not change significantly between assessments. However, at age 13, there was a clear improvement. Nationally the improvement was 6 percentage points (from 49% to 55%); girls improved 9 percentage points and white students improved 8 percentage points. Low-metro students, on the other hand, declined 8 percentage points in a four-year period.

Organizational Letter Writing

In the following two exercises, 13-year-olds were asked to write persuasive letters about school situations, taking the point of view of a concerned student. Responses were judged on how well students presented and supported their arguments. Exercise 4 measures the ability of the 13-year-olds to prepare and support arguments.

EXERCISE 4. A Letter to the Parents' Club

Imagine the Parents' Club of your school is sponsoring a Friday evening dance for the eighth grade. The dance hours are from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Many students feel this is not long enough. Pretend that you are Pat Smith and write a letter to the Parents' Club stating your point of view. Explain why you AGREE or DISAGREE with the idea of a dance from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Remember to take only ONE point of view.

The key terms in the directive are "stating your point of view" and "explain," which requires a persuasive orientation as well as the need to define a position, and "many students feel this is not long enough," specifying the issue.

There were three types of letters.

1. Letters in which the writer did not take a clear position, or did not give any reasons for the position taken.

These respondents may have taken a position, but they did not present an argument or invent supporting evidence. Some papers may express disagreement with the present plans, but little else. Many papers may restate that the dance is not long enough but offer no elaboration or support for this assertion; others may make a request for longer hours but offer no reason for the requested change. Still others may present ideas or evidence that, because of their irrelevance, do not function as part of an argument or as supporting evidence. Examples of these include:

Dear Parents Club

I'm writing to ask you to lengthen the dance one hour. I feel three hours would be more sufficient.

Sincerely
Pat Smith

Dear Parent's Club

I like the idea of the dance. But don't you think the hours are to early. Why not let the kids decide what time it should begin and end?

I hope you consider the idea.

Sincerely,
Pat Smith
8th grade Student

Dear Parents' Club

the students of the eighth grade do not think that the dance hours from 7 to 9 are long enofe. They think that the hours should be longer because if they come at 8:30 they will only have a half hour to dance. So if you change the hours to 6 to 10 it will give them more time to dance. But on the other hand some kids cannot stay out untill 10 at night. So make your decision.

Yours truely
the 8th Graders

2. Letters in which the writer took a clear position and gave one unelaborated reason. These papers showed some evidence of inventing arguments. The writer took a position and offered minimum

supporting evidence. These responses presented reasons for agreement or disagreement with the plans, but the reasons were either conventional, vague or general and were stated with elaboration that was weak or incomplete. These papers demonstrated minimal acknowledgment of the elements of argumentation: syntactical cues (i.e., connectives such as "since," "because," "if," "but," "so") are often indicative of this acknowledgment. Examples include:

Dear Parent's Club

I feel that your Friday evening dance should be longer than two hours. All the kids my age feel that they sould have more time to talk and discuss things with their friends, without having to worry about school and making it to class on time and other stuff like that. I would grately appreciate it if you would bring this up at your next meeting.

Sincerely,
Pat Smith

to the parents club

I disagree with the Dance from 7 to 9 beacase when your at a dance time goes by so fast and seems like your only there for a little wile only when your having fun and when you go to danses you usually have fun.

Beacase it is exciting when your at a dance at least i think so and that is my point of view.

From Pat Smith

Dear Parent Club,

I think the dance time is not long enough. I think it should be at least 7:00 to 10:00 because most of the Kids like to dance, and we all enjoy it. So I think it should be a longer time.

Thank you
Pat Smith

3. Competent letters in which the writer presented two or more arguments, or one that was elaborated upon. The writer took a position and gave several bits of evidence or arguments to substantiate it. These papers presented reasons for agreement or disagreement with the plan; such reasons were supported or elaborated with details or evidence that were concrete and specific. Some papers showed a specific awareness of the need to have more time to participate fully in the typical activities of a dance (i.e., "by the time you buy your tickets, hang up your coat and eat" or "by the time shy people or kids without dates can begin dancing," etc.). An example of this type of letter is:

Dear Parents' Club

I would like to thank you for giving the dance for the eighth grade students. I disagree on the time schedule. It should last about 60 min. longer. As you know most students need to get their parents' consent and to ask them for transportation to the dance. This way the students who would arrive later would have about the same time as the early arrivers. Also, most students think since this is a Friday and there is no school the next day, they could stay longer. I would appreciate if the Parents' Club would get together and try to consider these changes.

Thank you
Pat Smith

The responses of students who gave incomprehensible or illegible replies, misunderstood the task, said I don't know or did not respond at all are shown in the "other" category (Table 6).

Sixty-one percent of the 13-year-olds showed competence in successfully presenting and supporting a point of view. An additional 23% of this age level could at least clearly express a point of view and thereby show some evidence of the skill. As the data show, a much greater percentage of the girls (67%) exhibited competence in this skill than of boys (54%). The performance level in low-SES (socioeconomic status) urban areas was only 5 per-

TABLE 6. Letter to the Parents' Club: Percentages of 13-Year-Olds in Each Scoring Category

Category	Percentages						
	National	Males	Females	Blacks	Whites	High Metro	Low Metro
Unclear and unelaborated position	12	14*	10*	20*	11*	7*	15
Clear but unelaborated position	23	26*	19*	23	23	23	21
Persuasive arguments and/or elaboration of position	61	54*	67*	46*	64*	69*	56
Other	5	6*	3*	11*	2*	1*	8

**Indicates significant difference from the nation.*

centage points below the national level. Black performance, on the other hand, was 15 points below the nation as a whole.

In Exercise 5, 13-year-olds are expected to use reasoned and systematic methods of persuasion to defend a proposition.

EXERCISE 5. A Letter to the Principal

Imagine that your principal asked for suggestions about how to make things better in your school. Write a letter to your principal telling him just ONE thing you think should be changed, how to bring about the change and how the school will be improved by it. Space is provided below and on the next three pages. Sign your letter "Chris Johnson."

333 West Street
Loden, Ohio 99999
September 5, 1973

Mark Hopkins, Principal
Martin Intermediate School
Loden, Ohio 99999

The key terms in the directive are "one thing you think should be changed, how to bring about changes and how the school will be improved by it." Taken together these terms indicate how the persuasion should be carried out. A systematic approach to the letter involves: (1) the identification of a problem that needs to be solved; (2) a proposal of a way to solve the problem; and (3) arguments and evidence to demonstrate that the proposed solution is feasible, practical and beneficial. Therefore, the qualities of the papers that were weighed as evidence of systematic persuasion included focus on one issue and appropriateness of development. Tone and format were not considered important criteria of a well-developed paper. The letters were evaluated and placed in the following four categories:

1. Letters in which the writer did not identify a problem or gave no evidence that the problem could be solved or was worth solving. Examples include:

Dear Sir

I think that our school could be improved by a soda machine in the lunchroom. A big machine should be instald in the furnace to prevent so much dust in the air. The would prevent a lot of of colds and viraces in the building. We should have more parties. We only have a christmas party and a last day of school party. Since us kids are so smart and have so much work to do we deserve a little more pleasure in our school days. I think also that sex education should be taught also. I my self am in the 7th grade and I've never been taught sex at school. My school is very good school and theres really nothing to be changed. The teachers care. At least <u>some</u> do. And we learn alot.

Sincerly yours,
Chris Johnson.

Dear Mr. Principal,

I think that the clothing system should be changed. Boys shouldn't be able to wear short pants without socks. Girls shouldn't be able to wear tight pants or dresses to short or where you can see something

when they bend over. The Teachers shouldn't be able to do these things either, but the kinds of clothes that are school issue.

Chris Johnson

2. Letters in which the writer identified a problem and explained EITHER how to solve the problem OR how the school would be improved if it were solved. Examples include:

Dear Mr. Hopkins,

I believe if there were more school activities the students would enjoy school.

More sports, expeditions, projects, things to keep us interested in school classes.

Sure learning is why we come to school, but at times it gets so boring.

If the teachers would let the students do projects of some sort they might enjoy classes more.

Please take my ideal into consideration.

Yours truly,
Chris Johnson

Dear Mr. Hopkins,

I think you should abolish the rule about mandatory art and music. It is unfair to expect students who are against taking these subjects. The money gained from smaller music and art programs could be used for a larger science lab. These few students who like these subjects could take them on an optional basis.

Sincerely yours,

3. Letters in which the writer identified a problem, explained how to solve the problem and told how the change would benefit the school. For example:

Dear sir

I think we should have the teachers coming to our rooms instade of use going to there classes and making noise not going to our classes or geting lost in the hales of the school and that was all the student wont get tired and concentrat on the subjects that they are sopose to have. next. and they would take care of there rooms clean the descks keep the walls clean and not fill up there desck with papers that they don't need and throw buble gum all over the place. and the school won't have to by more furniture and have mony left to by books fore a better education.

Your truly
Chris Johnson.

Dear Mr. Hopkins,

in regard to your request to the students about the changes the school should make, I feel that only one change is necessary.

The fact is, this school children have no say at all about the activities going on at our school to represent the school childrens' ideas and arguments, the school would be much better.

The way we sould do this, is first to have candidates for four offices. President, Vice-Presidend, Secretary, and Treasurer. After doing this, you should have the candidates stage an election campaign of some sort. This is usually done by making posters, buttons, etc. Then set an election date. On election day before the students cast their votes, have each candidate for each office make an election speach telling the student why he should be chosen. After this is done, have the election, count the votes, and have the Council put into effect right away. I'm sure the school would benifit greatly from this.

Yours truly,
Chris Johnson

4. Letters in which the writer systematically identified a problem, explained a problem, explained how to solve the problem, told how the change would benefit the school. Examples include:

Mr. Hopkins,

There are many problems in our school and I know that you, the principal are trying your best to make this a good, safe school for the children as well as the teachers. An extremely important problem is

cutting, or unexplained absence of a student. Every day in the halls there are kids running around and disturbing all the other students in there classroom. This prevents the teachers from teaching and the students from learning. I know that you have tried to prevent this by putting teachers on hall patrol on their free periods and by using the system "clean sweep" but it just has not been working. I think that the penalty for cutting should be made harsher on the kids. As of now if you are caught in clean sweep your parents should be called and told to come to the school and talk with the childs quidance counciler. This would benefit the whole school because these students could not disrupt the classes anymore, and the students could learn what is taught to them.

Thank you,
Chris Johnson

Dear Mr Hopkins,

I think one very important problem in this school is the lack of relevancy in the courses offered here. Many thing we learn here, we will never use again. For example, am I going to spend one year worrying over whether or not 2x = 12? Count how many sleepless nights I will spend worrying about 5 causes of the American Revolution.

In order to change this problem, new textbooks will probably be needed. Of course, anyone who wants to could study the same books we read now. The most basic changes would be that teachers could attempt to make things sound halfway interesting.

This school by more student awareness woul have more student activity. By better linking of past & current problems we could understand how to deal with current problems.

Yours truly,
Chris Johnson

Other responses included those that were illegible or incomprehensible, letters that misunderstood the task or cases in which no response was given (Table 7).

TABLE 7. Letter to the Principal: Percentages of 13-Year-Olds in Each Scoring Category

Category	Percentages						
	National	Males	Females	Blacks	Whites	High Metro	Low Metro
Neither define nor defend a change	26	30*	23*	42*	23*	19*	38*
Identified problem, reasoning undeveloped	40	40*	38*	32*	40	36	29
Define and defend a change	27	24*	31*	14*	30*	34*	22
Systematically define and defend a change	4	2*	6*	1*	5*	9*	1*
Other	3	4	2	11*	2*	1*	10*

**Indicates significant difference from the nation.*

Less than one out of three 13-year-olds (31%) could define and logically develop arguments to defend a change in their school. Most of the responses (66%) either lacked any developed reasoning or did not propose a change or identify a problem. The percentage of students (31%) that wrote competent letters to the principal was much lower than the percentage (61%) that wrote competent letters to the parents' club (Exercise 4). However, since the letter to the principal demanded higher level skills, the results might be expected.

CHAPTER 2

BUSINESS AND VOCATIONAL LETTERS

The writing exercises found in this section are business or vocational in nature. Business and vocational letters are easily recognizable. They generally adhere most closely to conventional forms and are directed to a specified audience. Their purpose is to facilitate the business and professional concerns of the writer. This writing is generally impersonal in tone and public or private in nature, depending on circumstances. Standard examples of this writing are the business letter and employment applications. While 9- and 13-year-olds are not often expected to do writing of this sort, they do need to on occasion. On the other hand, 17-year-olds and young adults are often called upon to do writing of this kind. In the following four exercises, National Assessment surveyed tasks ranging from basic requests for a product, to complaints about merchandise and a request to correct it, to complicated job application letters.

Business Letters

The first two examples are simple, explanatory letters; the job applications involve both explanatory and persuasive elements. Nine-year-olds were asked to complete the following exercise.

EXERCISE 6. Buffalo-Bill-Kite Request Letter

Here is an advertisement from a magazine. Pretend that you are interested in the kite that is being advertised. You want to get one right away. All you have to do is send for it!

Write a short letter to the proper place and order a kite.

In the nation as a whole, 14% of the 9-year-olds in 1974 were able to successfully order the kite. This is a decline from five years earlier. To do so they needed to incorporate the following aspects of a request into their letter.

1. Request the product wanted (kite).
2. Write to the proper destination (Buffalo Bill Museum).
3. Provide their name and address in complete form to allow the product to be shipped. (This included full name, street address, city and state.)

Table 8 gives the percentages for the nation and various other groups as well in both assessment years.

TABLE 8. Percentages of 9-Year-Olds Successfully Ordering a Kite

	1969	1974
Nation	17*	14*
Males	13*	10*
Females	20*	18*
Blacks	10*	6*
Whites	18*	16*
High metro	19	20*
Low metro	4*	3*

**Indicates significant difference from the nation.*

As the data in Table 8 show, few 9-year-olds in any of the groups could integrate all the tasks necessary to order the kite. Some successful examples of those who could include:

Dear Buffalo Bill Museum,

I would like you to send me one Giant Buffalo Kite. I am glad this does not cost any money. I think you should put more offers out like this one.

My name is

John Jay and I live
8537 April Ave
Park Minn.

Dear buffalo bill museum

I would like one of your Giant Buffalo Kites I usually send away for your kites often, its usally very windy out here so I make use of mother natures wind. I like also like the outdoors, because you can run and run for miles with pal kite right behind you. My name and address is.

Shelly Lion.
39 Heater AVE.
Hartford Connecticut
60606

A wide variety of letters were considered unacceptable. In some cases the omissions were minor, such as leaving out a last name or street number; other responses made little sense at all. Some examples showing the range of unacceptable letters follow:

Windy Road
Richmond, VA
10507

Dear Sirs:

Please send me your free offer on a Giant Buffulo kite.

Your truly
Paula

Mindy Brown R No. 4 Caller Lane Washington City 31767.
Buffelo Bill Museum

I an a girl. I want a girl buffelo today. And I want a good one. And please mail is soon. I went two of them for me and my sister.

The pictur i like. and its time to fly a kite. because its free. I like wooden handle. because i like buffalo. does it go high.

Bryan Scott
Central Street
Rockford Illinois

Larry Wrong RDINapelesNew York to Buffolo Bill Museum. How much does it cost. IS it garinted.

Although few of the 9-year-olds could integrate all the tasks needed to write a letter and obtain the kite, the percentages able to complete parts of the task varied considerably. Table 9 shows the percentages of 9-year-olds in 1974 able to successfully complete particular aspects of this exercise.

A closer examination of the data found in Table 9 reveals an interesting pattern in the performance of boys and girls. A greater percentage of girls successfully answered each aspect of the request letter. There is approximately a 10-percentage-point spread between the performance of 9-year-old boys and girls on any given aspect of the request. Over all,

this pattern held as well; 18% of the girls and 10% of the boys successfully integrated all the tasks necessary to order the kite. The most noticeable change in performance between 1969 and 1974 involved use of a zip code. The percentage of students using a zip code increased 5 points between the assessments. Students are becoming more familiar with its use.

TABLE 9. Percentages of 9-Year-Olds Acceptably Completing Various Aspects of Kite Request

Aspect	Percentages		
	National	Males	Females
Request for kite	78	73*	84*
Destination	45	39*	50*
Return name	54	49*	59*
Return street address	52	48*	56*
Return city	35	31*	40*
Return state	34	29*	38*
Return zip code	25	19*	30*
Greeting	38	31*	45*
Closing	24	18*	31*

**Indicates significant difference from the nation.*

Thirteen-year-olds were asked to respond to the following exercise.

EXERCISE 7. Klippo-Company Request Letter

Ned Nelson, who lives at 17 Palmetto Street in Lamprey, Florida 33000, ordered one hundred special pencils from the Klippo Company for his father's birthday. The pencils were supposed to have Fred Nelson, the name of Ned's father, stamped on them.

Ned got the pencils through the mail on September 15, 1971, three weeks before his father's birthday. When he unwrapped the package, however, he found that the pencils had been stamped Fed Nelson by mistake.

The letter you see below came with the pencils. Ned decided to write to Mr. Wharton right away and try to get the pencils stamped correctly. Write Ned's letter to Mr. Wharton.

KLIPPO PENCIL COMPANY
1040 Clarion Street
Thompson, Iowa 50301

DEAR CUSTOMER,

We are happy to fill your order. Did you know that KLIPPO sells more personalized pencils than any other mail-order company? Thanks for making KLIPPO the country's BEST!

We'll be happy to serve you again.

/s/Sam Wharton
PRODUCTS MANAGER

Three out of four 13-year-olds (75%) requested change in the pencils based on the mistake that had been made. Seventy percent of the boys at this age did so, compared to 79% of the girls. Table 10 gives the percentages for various other groups as well.

TABLE 10. Klippo-Pencil Exercise: Percentages of 13-Year-Olds Giving Acceptable Responses

	Percentages
Nation	75
Males	70*
Females	79*
Blacks	52*
Whites	80*
High metro	81*
Low metro	65

**Indicates significant difference from the nation.*

Both acceptable and unacceptable responses were further categorized to differentiate between levels of responses. Acceptable letters *had* to include: (1) a statement of the problem, (2) a given or implied directive and (3) the correct spelling. There were four categories of acceptability, based on the mention of time requirements. These were:

1. A specific time requirement such as three

weeks, or October 15, was given.

2. A specific time pressure such as "my father's birthday" was given.

3. A general time pressure such as "please hurry" or "rush" was given.

4. No mention of time requirement was given.

Examples of each of these include:

Specific Time Requirement

Dear Mr. Wharton,

The pencils I received from your company were misprinted. I asked for the name Fred Nelson to be on the pencils. They came out Fed Nelson. I am going to send them back for reprint for my father's birthday. I need them in two weeks.

Sincerely,
Ned Nelson

Mr. Wharton,

I ordered 1 hundred pencils from you asking to put on them Fred Nelson, But instead you put Fed Nelson on them. I understand your mistake and I am not real mad, but my Father's Birthday is in 3 weeks from date of this letter, and I need them as soon as possible. could you have them ready in three weeks or less. I will thank you very kindly if you could. If not I still would like them. I thank for the time and trouble you will have gone through.

Yours truley,
Ned Nelson

Specific Time Pressure

Dear Mr Wharton

I would like to inform you that when I received your pencils they had Fed Nelson. I know this was a mistake but I would like to tell you because some people might consider this bad bussiness.

It could also loss you some coustamers. Will I just thought I would inform you. Also would you please send me a new order with Fred Nelson Please send them right away my father's birthday is coming up.

Thank you
Ned Nelson

Dear Klippo Pencil Company:

I got the pencils you sent me but there was a mistake on the wording instead of "Fred Nelson" they put "Fed Nelson" I am sending this back to you please correct them and hurry sending them back because my fathers birthday is coming up and I want the pencils by then.

Ned Nelson

General Time Pressure

Ned Nelson
17 Palmetto Street
Lamprey, Florida 33000

Dear Mr. Wharton

I ordered 100 pencils from you. They were suposed to have Fred Neoson on them but they had Fed Nelson. Please send the right ones. I will send back the rong ones. Please hurry.

Thank you
Ned Nelson

No Time Requirement

Products Manager
Klippo Pencil Company

Dear Sir,

I have ordered 100 of your pencil which I wanted on it Fred Nelson, for my father. But when I received these pencils the name was spelled wrong. it was spelled Fred Nelson.

I would apreciate if I could send the pencils back and have them corrected. Thank you.

Sincerely Yours
Ned Nelson

Unacceptable replies were categorized on the basis of the groupings shown in Table 11 . In general, responses were considered unacceptable if they did not meet all the general requirements discussed above — or were illegible, incomprehensible or nonsensical.

TABLE 11. Klippo-Pencil Exercise: Percentages of Unacceptable Responses in Each Category, Age 13

Category	Percentages
Incorrect directive given	2
No directive given	1
No name correction	9
Wrong name given	3
No mention of mistake given	2
Illegible, incomprehensible, nonsensical	8
I don't know	1
No response	0

The greatest percentage of unacceptable responses either did not mention the correct spelling of the name or simply did not make sense. Three percent of the 13-year-olds confused the name of the son (Ned) with that of the father (Fred) and asked that the pencils be restamped Ned Nelson.

Table 12 provides the percentages of students' responses in each of the four acceptable categories.

Approximately one-third of the acceptable responses provided no time requirement at all. When time was mentioned, the reference was generally to a specific time requirement. Approximately one out of four acceptable responses fell into this category, a slight improvement over 1969's percentage of 17. Girls generally were more specific than boys, 28% of them mentioning specific time requirements compared to 19% of the boys.

Employment Application Letters

Writing a letter of application for a job involves a wide range of skills. Most important are the use of persuasive-writing techniques and an awareness of standard conventions of a routine business letter. The job application exercises that follow evaluate the ability of 17-year-olds and young adults in these two basic areas.

Among the questions that these exercises address are: Does the writer understand the need to demonstrate interest in the job and provide data on higher qualifications? Can the writer articulate his or her past work experiences and make them specifically and clearly relevant to the job being sought? Is the writer aware of the need to identify himself and the specific purpose for writing? Are references included? Is an interview requested?

Seventeen-year-olds were asked to complete the following exercise.

TABLE 12. Klippo-Pencil Exercise: Percentages of Acceptable Responses in Each Category, Age 13

Category	Percentages						
	National	Males	Females	Blacks	Whites	High Metro	Low Metro
Specific time requirement	23	19*	28*	14*	26*	32*	18
Specific time pressure	10	9	12	11	10	11	12
General time pressure	4	4	3	2*	4*	5	4
No time requirement	37	37	37	25*	40*	33	30*

**Indicates significant difference from the nation.*

EXERCISE 8. Summer Job Application

> **SUMMER ONLY**
>
> **Need two high school students to work in large clothing store. $85 week, July and August. Write John Fried, Box 26078, New York Times, New York, New York 10017.**

Chris Jones lives at 3600 Larch Street in New York, New York 10004. Chris has finished the junior year at Truman High School and has been looking for a summer job. Chris spotted this advertisement in the New York Times and has decided to apply for the job. Write Chris' letter of application to Mr. Fried.

The essential information needed to write this letter included: the level of education the applicant had completed, the job he or she was applying for and a way the applicant could be contacted. Sixteen percent of the 17-year-olds nationwide included all three items of essential information in their letters. Table 13 shows the percentages for selected groups as well.

TABLE 13. Essential Job Application Information, Age 17

	Percentages
Nation	16
Males	12*
Females	21*
Blacks	8*
Whites	18*
High metro	17
Low metro	11*

**Indicates significant difference from the nation.*

A significant aspect of persuasive writing is the ability of the writer to choose from among the details available to or invented by him those which best accomplish the persuasive intent of the particular writing task. It goes beyond being able to supply essential information or provide some detail that may or may not be helpful. All details should be, in some way, appropriate to persuade the reader that, in this case, he is sincerely interested in the job and, more important, that he is specifically qualified by experience, training or personal attributes to effectively carry out the duties of the job he is applying for. The details of the letter should be so appropriate that he will be granted an interview or even the job because his letter was more persuasive than the others received by the employer.

Therefore, details that are extraneous, irrelevant or incoherent may detract from the persuasive effect of the paper; even more harmful are those details that malign or misrepresent the job, the employer or the writer, or which demonstrate the writer's lack of awareness of the demands of the rhetorical situation and the audience.

Some papers, including those that included the essential job application information demonstrated varying degrees of success in controlling and focusing the details they invented for the task.

The data that are found in Table 14 evaluate the writer's ability to control his material so that what is included only supports the persuasive intent of the application by focusing on those details that are appropriate to establishing his fitness for the job.

TABLE 14. Job Application Information: Percentages of Respondents Giving Essentials and Job-Related Characteristics, Age 17

Category	Percentages
Essentials + one	10
Essentials + two	6

Therefore, details that detract from the potential value or worth of the applicant to the employer or in some way denigrate the employer or the position are harmful to the final purpose of the letter. Details that establish the candidate's need for the job rather than

his qualifications may not be harmful but will have little persuasive value. However, if, in addition to establishing his qualifications for the job through detailing his past work experience, training or other special qualifications, the applicant includes personal, biographical or autobiographical details that do in some way lend added weight to his potential value or worth, he is demonstrating quite sophisticated awareness of the rhetorical task and control of appropriate related details. Competence is indicated by the degree to which all invented detail is appropriate to the persuasive intent of the writing task. The job application letters have been divided into basic categories in order to distinguish varying degrees of competence. These include those who gave the essentials and one job-related characteristic and those who gave the essentials and two job-related characteristics. The percentages of students in each of these categories is shown in Table 14.

No 17-year-olds wrote appropriately formatted letters containing the essentials plus two or more strongly persuasive personal, educational or work-experience facts.

Many more respondents gave some detailed information about these characteristics than are found in Table 14; however, the information was not directly relevant to the job application.

More detailed information on the percentages of 17-year-olds that gave information about their education and training, work experience and personal qualities is found in Table 15. The data show what percentage of respondents gave at least one type of information within each of the three categories.

TABLE 15. Details of Information Found in Summer Job Application, Age 17

Category	Percentages
Education and training	72
Work experience	20
Personal qualities	33
How to contact for interview	65
Would appear for interview	17

Table 16 provides information on the percentages of respondents who used conventional formatting techniques in composing their letters. Although the past rigidity of specified forms for the writing of business letters is becoming more flexible, there is still enough universal demand for convention to make the awareness of it important.

TABLE 16. Summer Job Application: Percentages of 17-Year-Olds Using Conventional Formatting Techniques

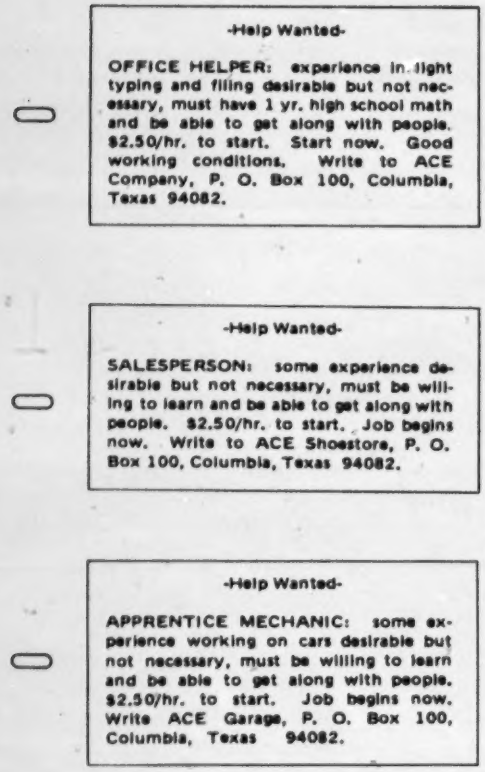
Category	Percentages
Gives proper return address	29
Gives any date in correct form	14
Gives complete and accurate inside address	20
Provides greeting	93
Provides closing	85
Provides signature	86
All six conventions	6

The levels of response in the various format categories were mixed, but they suggest that few 17-year-olds know how to put together a proper business letter. Twenty-nine percent of this age level could give a proper return address (including the address, city and state), and 20% could provide a proper inside address taken from the ad. Most of the students could provide a proper greeting, closing and signature. However, only 6% of the students correctly provided all six parts of the format for a business letter.

Both 17-year-olds and young adults were asked to apply for one of the jobs shown in the exercise that follows.

EXERCISE 9. Full-Time Job Application

Below are three ads from the Help Wanted section of a newspaper. Read all three ads and choose which job you would like best if you had to apply for one of them.



-Help Wanted-

OFFICE HELPER: experience in light typing and filing desirable but not necessary, must have 1 yr. high school math and be able to get along with people. $2.50/hr. to start. Start now. Good working conditions. Write to ACE Company, P. O. Box 100, Columbia, Texas 94082.

-Help Wanted-

SALESPERSON: some experience desirable but not necessary, must be willing to learn and be able to get along with people. $2.50/hr. to start. Job begins now. Write to ACE Shoestore, P. O. Box 100, Columbia, Texas 94082.

-Help Wanted-

APPRENTICE MECHANIC: some experience working on cars desirable but not necessary, must be willing to learn and be able to get along with people. $2.50/hr. to start. Job begins now. Write ACE Garage, P. O. Box 100, Columbia, Texas 94082.

TABLE 17. Full-Time Job Application: Percentages of Respondents Giving Essentials and Job-Related Characteristics, Ages 17 and Adult

Category	Age 17	Adults
Essentials + one	1%	2%
Essentials + two	2	5

TABLE 18. Percentages of 17-Year-Olds and Adults Giving Various Types of Information on Full-Time Job Applications

Information	Age 17	Adults
Correctly gives job description	78%	82%
Describes qualifications	82	81
Provides references	9	14
Shows willingness to interview	16	26
Provides proper way to contact	36	42
Asks for more information	8	4
Gives reason to consider application	10	7
Gives personal behavior related to job	65	49

Unlike the summer job application (Exercise 8), the ads are somewhat specific and suggest that persuasive details about education, work and personal qualifications should be definitely included in the response.

As was the case in the previous exercise, the letters were evaluated on a number of different qualities. Only 5% of the 17-year-olds included the essential information in their letters (some education or training related to the job, the job they were applying for and how to be contacted), compared to 10% at ages 26 to 35.

The percentages of respondents at both age levels giving details about personal job-related characteristics beyond the essential ones are shown in Table 17.

Table 18 provides general data about the type of information that both 17-year-olds and young adults included in their letters.

More specific information on the various ways people described the qualifications of the applicant are found in Table 19.

Three categories of qualifications were given most often at both age levels: (1) special related training, (2) experience at the specific job and (3) behavioral traits relevant to the job. Not surprisingly, the young adults wrote about job experience more often than the 17-year-olds. The 17-year-olds wrote about special training and behavioral traits more often than the adults. These data indicate that many of the responses were specific and provided relevant information to the prospective employers, yet only 36% of the 17-year-olds and 42% of the young adults provided a proper way to be contacted (Table 18), and only between 5 and 10% included all the essential information in their application.

TABLE 19. Percentages of 17-Year-Olds and Adults Giving Various Qualifications on Full-Time Job Application

Qualifications	Age 17	Adults
1. EDUCATION AND TRAINING		
Gives level of school completed	13%	17%
Gives special related training	44	30
Gives general statement of education	2	2
2. EXPERIENCE		
Gives specific duties on previous job	3	7
Gives experience at specific job	46	58
Gives general statement of experience	16	11
3. PERSONAL QUALITIES		
Gives facts relevant to job	13	14
Gives behavioral traits relevant to job	65	49
Gives generalities not relevant to job	3	8

The level of knowledge that respondents showed in formatting the application letters is shown in Table 20.

TABLE 20. Percentages of 17-Year-Olds and Adults Successfully Formatting the Full-Time Job Applications

Format Category	Age 17	Adults
Return address	20%	24%
Date	32	40
Inside address	33	39
Appropriate greeting	92	88
Appropriate closing	85	82
Signature	85	85
All the above	8	13

As was the case in Exercise 8 (refer to Table 16), relatively few respondents at either age level used the correct format for a business letter. However, a greater percentage of adults than 17-year-olds correctly formatted the letter. Thirteen percent of the young adults and 8% of the 17-year-olds were able to correctly format all the aspects of a business letter.

Although the choice of job that respondents selected should not have affected the results, the data National Assessment collected about the selection process does provide some insights into the perceptions people have of their roles within our society. Table 21 displays data on the percentages of males and females selecting each of the three ads.

TABLE 21. Percentages of Males and Females Selecting Each Ad

Job	Age 17 Percentages		Adult Percentages	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Office helper	16	70	14	64
Salesperson	24	26	31	31
Apprentice mechanic	59	4	54	5

As Table 21 indicates, sex-linked stereotypes about jobs are prevalent both among 17-year-olds and young adults.

CHAPTER 3

OBSERVATIONS

While it is difficult to form generalizations based on limited information, the patterns revealed in the data presented in this report support the following observations about the persuasive- and explanatory-letter writing skills of young Americans.

1. While more than three out of four 9-year-olds could write acceptable personal letters such as a simple "thank you" or "get well" note, the overall quality of these responses did vary considerably. Only 14% of the 9-year-olds successfully wrote a business request that required simple explanatory skills. By age 13, however, three-fourths of the respondents acceptably wrote such a letter. It would appear that these simple explanatory-writing skills are developed sometime between the ages of 9 and 13.

   The data National Assessment has collected in writing bears out the fact that persuasive-writing skills are complex and difficult to master. Thirteen-year-olds showed varying degrees of persuasive-writing skills in the letters written to the parents' club and the school principal. When respondents were expected only to present and support a point of view, well over half (59%) could do so competently; when asked to go beyond this and construct appropriate and effective arguments as well, only 30% at age 13 were successful. The percentages of respondents able to use persuasive skills in writing letters of application were low both for ages 17 and young adults. Although a high percent included each of the various components, not many included them in combination. No more than 16% of these respondents, and in most cases fewer, could incorporate the essential elements of a job application into their letters. Even fewer invented or used more than one job-related personal characteristic to enhance the application letter and thereby make the application more persuasive.

3. The various conventions of letter writing give young Americans of all ages trouble. Only slightly more than half (55%) of the 13-year-olds and about one-fourth of the 9-year-olds know the common format of a friendly letter. The conventions of business-letter writing proved difficult as well among 17-year-olds and young adults. Approximately 1 respondent in 10 (8% at age 17 and 13% at adult) could successfully format a letter of application for a job.

4. As in other areas of writing, young women have more highly developed letter writing skills than do young men in all the areas measured. Black and low-SES (socioeconomic status) urban students consistently perform below the national average on these exercises, while students in affluent urban and suburban communities are above average.

5. A few of the letter writing tasks found in this report measured changes in performance between 1969 and 1974. Although declines were more prevalent than improvements, it would be difficult to make any conclusive statements based on so few items. Based on the measures we have, 9-year-old performance appeared to decline slightly; 13-year-olds showed slight improvement.

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